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**The Report Committee for Felice Louise House  
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**Portraiture and Feminine Identity**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Bradley Petersen

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Richard Jordan

**Portraiture and Feminine Identity**

**by**

**Felice Louise House, B.F.A.; M.S.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May, 2011**

## **Dedication**

For my parents, Donald and Lynette House and my fiancée, Dana Younger.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my graduate committee, Melissa Miller, Sarah Canright, Dan Sutherland and Michael Ray Charles for the many hours they spent talking with me about my work. I am especially indebted to Bradley Petersen for his dedication, support and encouragement.

April, 2011

## **Abstract**

### **Portraiture and Feminine Identity**

Felice Louise House, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Bradley Petersen

To portray women without objectifying them is an intentional, political act. The art historical tradition is to paint women to extol their sexual beauty and to encourage possessiveness. There is a new guard of women painters who provide a counterpoint to this tradition by depicting a more multifaceted version of the female psyche. I align myself as an artist with them by attempting to broaden the depiction of women as subjects in painting. My subjects are beautiful and observable, but not consumable. They are more public than private and more iconic than intimate. My paintings have a strong connection to traditional portraiture in both style and technique. However, my subjects are contemporized through the use of modern fashion, unexpected facial expressions, unique color relationships and photographic cropping.

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## Portraiture and Identity

Portrait painting conveys something about the identity of the sitter, but a portrait also has the potential to say something broader about the human condition. Issues of both personal identity and identity politics arise when looking at a portrait. Viewers make an instantaneous evaluation of the subject based on perceived gender, race, sexual identity and class. In this way the subject being depicted in portraits is political and says something about the times in which that subject lived.

*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Identity Politics.” written by Cressida Heyes, states that identity politics “as a mode of organizing is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, that one’s identity as a woman or as a Native American, for example, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one’s group identity), violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness (Heyes, "Identity Politics").”

Alice Neel worked in relative obscurity for most of her life, making portraits of individuals without the protection and privilege of wealth. In 1938 Neel moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem and began to paint her neighbors, mostly women and children (Hills 66). The Haitian housekeeper and her child shown in Illustration 1 (Hills 60) is an example of how Neel viewed the imperfections of the human body as the window into the souls of her subjects, making their bodies equal to their faces as manifestations of identity.



Illustration 1: Alice Neel, Carmen and Judy, oil on canvas, 40” x 30”, 1972

Like Neel’s work, Barkley Hendricks’ paintings give power to an oppressed group. Hendricks’ life-size portraits, with their high fashion and confident posturing, are visually symbolic of the advanced political footing of the African-American community in the United States post-1960’s (see Illustration 2). His figures show the viewer affluent, stylish, self-assured African-Americans and give a voice to people who were not, and are still not, represented by art history. Hendricks was not showing people in the depths of despair; rather, he presented his subjects as empowered and unapologetic. On a personal level I am interested in these paintings because they use the language of classical painting to convey something that is politically meaningful and relevant to contemporary life.



Illustration 2: Barkley Hendricks, *Lawdy Mama*, oil on canvas, 54” x 36”, 1969

One might expect to see a king in the lavishly patterned surroundings that painter Kehinde Wiley places his subjects in. But instead of monarchs in regal attire, Wiley gives us young, usually African-American males in street clothes. Wiley’s strategy of posing his subjects in postures taken directly from historical paintings is a political act; he is forcing the viewer to confront the invisibility and stereotyping of African-American males in American culture. The easily digestible colors and patterns he uses are the sugar coating that allows the viewer to swallow a political pill. Illustration 3 shows a black man in a pose taken directly from Sir Anthony van Dyck’s painting *Le Roi a la Chasse*. The young man appears regal and triumphant emerging from the patterned background.



Illustration 3: Kehinde Wiley, *After Sir Anthony van Dyck's Le Roi a la Chasse*, oil on canvas, 32" x 39", 2009

Like Wiley's work, the strength of Paula Rego's paintings comes from the artist's insistence on challenging viewers' expectations. As seen in Illustration 4a, *Dog Women* is raw and animalistic. Through such dramatic depictions of her subjects Rego is able to capture a wide psychological profile of her subjects, much like Lucien Freud and those influenced by him. In contrast, the women Malcolm Liepke presents (see Illustration 4b) are filtered through the lens of the traditional male gaze. He depicts women as coy, seductive, and, most importantly, available for consumption by the viewer. Paula Rego and painter Jenny Saville react against that approach by capturing the grotesque and emotionally raw conditions of their sitters.



a.



b.

Illustration 4: A Comparison between Paula Rego and Malcolm Liepke

a. Paula Rego, *Dog Woman*, pastel on canvas, 42" x 63", 1994

b. Malcolm Liepke, *Sideways Glance*, oil on canvas, 48" x 48", 2007

## **My Goals**

To portray women without objectifying them is an intentional, political act. The art historical tradition is to paint women to extol their sexual beauty and to encourage possessiveness, as Liepke does. Neel, Rego, and Saville provide a counterpoint to this tradition by depicting a more multifaceted version of the female psyche. I align myself as an artist with these women by attempting to broaden the depiction of women as subjects in painting. My subjects are beautiful and observable, but they are not consumable. They are more public than private and more iconic than intimate. My paintings have a strong connection to traditional portraiture in both style and technique. However, my subjects are contemporized through the use of modern fashion, unexpected expressions, unique color relationships and photographic cropping.

## **Working Process**

It is my goal to paint portraits that confront the viewer with not only the political and public identity of the subject but also with the physicality of paint. I used my own intuitive interpretation during the process of painting to shift color and value from the original source photograph. I use paint to bring myself into the image. The expressive nature of my paint handling helps to reveal the humanity and emotion within my subjects. From a distance my work appears blended, almost photographic. However, as the viewer steps closer, choppy, broken marks become discernible and the image falls into abstraction. The ephemeral quality created by these brush marks mirrors the intangibility of the subjects.

In photographic portraiture the mechanical lens works to transform the image of the sitter into two dimensions. My process uses both the mechanical interpretation of the lens and the secondary translation into paint. I begin each painting with one or two photographic sessions. These sessions are very intuitive and playful. The subject and I play dress up with props and materials from the studio. I take a lot of photographs during these sessions. My inner critic doesn't appear until later, when I sort through the pile of photos looking for something I can connect with. Once I settle on a handful of photographs, I use Photoshop to manipulate and correct the images before getting down to the actual act of painting. I often bring in a head from one photograph and piece it together with a body from another to create suitable reference material.

In order to focus my experimentation and control the lighting in the studio, I built a booth for my models to sit in (see Illustration 5). The booth raises the sitter to my eye level and creates a psychological separation between the observer and the observed. The psychological dynamic created by this staging aids in the creation of a public persona.

I introduce a variety of patterns and backgrounds into the image by hanging fabric behind the sitter. The color and shapes of the patterned fabrics offer an entry point into

explorations of paint handling. These cloth backgrounds provide a counterpoint to the subject. They offer a supplemental way to reveal information about the subject and can lead the viewer to make cultural associations. In classical portraiture there is a clear hierarchy between subject and background. My patterned backgrounds help break down this hierarchy by becoming as important as the subject. They also serve as a kind of camouflage that the subject can retreat into or appear out of.



Illustration 5: The booth



## The Work

Motivated by the desire to see images of women that I can relate to, I began to paint my female colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin in 2010. After spending months and years with these fellow artists I was familiar with their personalities, their likes and their dislikes. It was my hope that this familiarity would allow my intuitive process to function in an informed way. Though I attempted many portraits during my time at the University of Texas, only four will be touched on in this report: *Jieun*, *Sarah*, *Mihee*, and a *Self Portrait*.

As is true with portraiture throughout the ages, these four paintings use posture, style, clothing and expression as visual symbols to convey the persona and social position of the sitters and to say something about the society in which they live. These portraits use the dualities of public/private and iconic/personal to create tension within the images. Color, brush mark and composition are all used strategically to simultaneously draw in the viewer and to push them away.

Although the four women in this series exhibit many characteristics associated with classical beauty, I have presented them in a way that denies the viewer the right to possess them. The viewer is given permission to observe but not to control, for these women are unapologetically aware of themselves and the viewer's gaze. Their defiant, at times apathetic, expressions challenge the viewer's assumptions about the accessibility of beautiful women.

The portrait of Mihee shows an iconic, public persona. The yellow-and-white-patterned fabric background acts as a pop culture halo referencing Mexican renderings of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Art historically-speaking, this background is related to the Baroque stylization found in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's famous sculpture *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, where metal is sculpted into rays behind the figures.

The classical side lighting used in the final painting, Illustration 6, brings a sense of familiarity to the image. The intimate and feminine act of braiding hair is contrasted with the defensive shoulder posturing. The warm glow on the shadow side of the subject's face sits in opposition to her cold expression. Compositionally this painting is made up of repeating circles. The circle created by the halo mimics the shape of the sitter's face as well as the positioning of her arms. The white rays of the "halo" and the straight line of the braid direct the viewer's eye toward the subject's face.



Figure 6: *Mihee*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2011

The portrait of Sarah Sage, meanwhile, plays with the integration and separation of pattern. One of my first attempts at integrating the dueling patterns found in the sitter's shirt and the background can be seen in Illustration 7. At that point I was trying to make the patterns interact through the use of finished and unfinished elements. I was reluctant to fill in the image completely for fear of losing movement. In the end I do not feel that the interaction of the two patterns was ever fully resolved.



Illustration 7: *Sarah Sage* in Process

In the final version of the painting, Illustration 8, the patterns form a camouflage for the sitter to exist within. Instead of reveling in the luxury of her lavish patterned surroundings, Sage harbors a certain amount of suspicion for the environment in which she is contained. Suspicion of the manmade is central to Sarah's personality. In her artwork she creates beautiful, and at the same time eerie, drawings from questionably manipulated natural sites and fabricated manmade environments. As a portrait painter, I felt it was my responsibility to capture that suspicion in order to communicate some part of the essence of Sarah.





Illustration 8: *Sarah Sage*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2011

In my self-portrait, Illustration 9, I introduce an overtly emotional subject. Facial expression is an important mode of communication in this portrait. I use distortion and exaggeration on the lips to heighten the emotive nature of the subject. The choppy, distinct brush marks and the cool neutral blues and greens in the shadow areas of the flesh give the sitter a tired, worn look.

My self-portrait is the only piece in the series that includes cropping. By cropping the arms and head I am able to lock the viewer into the frame, creating a sense of claustrophobia. I left the shirt in a drawn, “under-painting” state to create the impression that it is see-through. Though nothing is revealed by the thin paint application on the shirt, it begs the viewer to look closer. In contrast, the slumped posture of the sitter, as well as the disheveled state of her shirt, tells the viewer that this woman is not emotionally available.



Illustration 9: *Self Portrait*, oil on canvas, 36” x 48”, 2011

The subtle color shifts and expressive brush marks that I used in the painting *Jieun Beth* make it the most unique piece in this series. Typically, I lay down a solid color ground as a starting point for my paintings. When I began this painting, however, I challenge myself by using slow gradients in the background of the image (see Illustration 10). I also greatly exaggerated the bluish cast of the skin color and color saturation in the background from the initial photographic source. This shift in process helped me create the unusual transitions and the popping, fresh color on display in the final painting (see Illustration 11).



Illustration 10: *Jieun Beth* Underpainting

Jieun's beauty attracts the viewer while the cool color I used to model her flesh is unsettling. The warm, saturated pinks I used on the background draw the viewer into the image, while the sharp aggressive brush marks I used to create the bramble behind her deny the viewer access. A pink camouflage fabric was the inspiration for the background



of this painting. When I saw it I knew it was a perfect background because it was ripe with opportunities for expressive mark making. I tried to use it behind many subjects before it found its home in this portrait of Jieun.

Jieun Beth, as her name indicates, is both Korean and American. The conflicting and competing patterns in her portrait mirror her upbringing traveling between Korea and the United States. The tension and excitement created in her personality from constantly navigating diverse and at times divergent cultural terrain is shown in this portrait.



Illustration 11: *Jieun Beth Kim*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2011

## Summary

The genre of portraiture has been refined for hundreds of years. Utilizing this historical foundation I have been able to explore and develop my work. When I started graduate school my paintings were theatrical and narrative. The portraits I am currently creating speak about both the personal and public identity of specific women. I had always strived for, but never achieved, a straightforward connection to my subject. The directness of these four portraits is a real breakthrough for me.

In future paintings I would like to work more with the placement of hands and with gestures. Positioning the sitter in more intentional ways will help me avoid the abrupt cropping of arms seen in a number of these paintings. I believe this would also help take attention away from the paintings' photographic sources. In the future I plan to incorporate symbolic objects into my works in order to provide more information about the sitter.

The brush marks in the background of the portrait of Jieun were an exciting expressive shift for me. The hue variation and exaggeration were also unique. I plan to incorporate both of these elements into future works because I feel that it helps to show the personal and emotional side of my subjects.

I am also interested in exploring how working both from life and photography can inform a single painting. The painting of Sarah Sage is the only portrait in the group that I worked on from both a photograph and directly from life, and on a personal level, I know I have to overcome some amount of anxiety that comes from interacting with models. There is an intimacy that is present when painting a single individual that is not present in a classroom setting. I think that over time the relationship building that occurs while having someone sit for me will become an important part of my work.

It has been interesting for me to see how little of a person's identity and personality my portraits are presently able to capture. The desire to show a more personal, intimate sitter revealed through expressive paint handling has become the fuel that drives my work.



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